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The UK needs a sustainable strategy for COVID-19

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The UK is well into the second wave of COVID-19 and has to date, lost 60,051 lives to SARS-Cov-2.¹ Cases have been rising exponentially since late August². The epidemic has been rapidly accelerating, with cases rising across all regions in England.^{4,6}

As of 4th November^{30th October}, the UK had 25,177,405 confirmed daily cases². These are almost certainly under-estimates as between 17th-23rd October, England alone had 52,000 estimated daily cases according to the office of national statistics.³ Estimates of the effective reproduction number in England vary between 1.1-1.6.^{4,5} The epidemic has been rapidly accelerating, with cases rising across all regions in England.^{4,6}

Daily deaths have doubled every fortnight¹ since early September, with 2,067,885 COVID-19 deaths in the last week² and around 12,000 more likely in the next month - the majority amongst those who have already been infected. With 129,000 patients currently hospitalised with COVID-19, health services are close to capacity in many regions.² There are over 1500 daily admissions in England are over 1,500, just a single doubling period away from the April peak of 3,000, which could be reached within 2-3 weeks.

On the 21st September, SAGE advised the UK government to institute a circuit breaker in England to suppress the epidemic. Instead, the government opted instead for several weeks of ineffective local tiered restrictions and cases continued to rise exponentially. Finally on the 31st of October, the government announced a 4-week national 'lockdown' commencing on the 5th November, xx weeks following initial SAGE advise.

All experts agree? Lockdowns are last resort measures that reflect a failure of the pandemic control strategy. They have massive impacts on the population, and the economy and inequalities. To avoid repeated lockdowns and their impacts, we need a sustainable COVID-19 public health strategy. Here, we make seven evidence-based recommendations for this.

First, we need urgent reform of the ineffective, private sector run find, test, trace, isolate and support (FFTIS) system. As recommended by Independent SAGE, the current system in England must be integrated with and led by the NHS England, with leadership from the local Directors of Public Health, so that local knowledge can facilitate prompt contact tracing.⁷ To ensure accurate and timely ~~prompt~~ testing, we recommend bringing together all current test providers in a national COVID testing consortium, under the oversight and management of NHS England.⁷ To make this system effective, people should be supported to isolate when required ('supported isolation') with accommodation, domestic assistance and financial support.⁷

We urge the government to cease extravagant promises about aspirational technologies.⁸ Technologies only deliver health care or save lives when integrated into clinical practice in an adequately resourced healthcare system. Focusing on the potential of a technology that does not

Commented [1]: I would move this sentence earlier, so that is is the second in the paragraph - it changes referencing, but it makes more logical sense for the flow of the argument.

Commented [2]: indeed slightly redundant...either one or the other sentence? Or combining them?

Commented [3]: I think ONS is office *for* national statistics

Commented [4]: I would move this sentence earlier, so that is is the second in the paragraph - it changes referencing, but it makes more logical sense for the flow of the argument.

Commented [5]: reference?

Commented [6R5]: it's based on doubling and the fact that deaths for the next 3 to 4 weeks are already locked in as people already infected. last two weeks we had 2.5K deaths in England - so next 2 weeks will somewhere between 4-5K and 2 weeks after that 8-10K. So 12K is a conservative estimate allowing for some recent slowing in growth rate

Commented [7R5]: yep we are already on ~300 deaths a day so even if that stays unchanged it's 9000 so I would think 12,000 as a minimum in the next month tragically.

Commented [8]: same reference?

Commented [9]: not sure how many references we are allowed for this piece? (is there a limit of 10 or 12?) if no limit then we could add more references to ensure all points are backed up.

Commented [10]: NHS England - currently it is theoretically under the umbrella of NHS, and wider public assumes it is already lead by NHS. I would specify this right away, as we do later.

Commented [11R10]: Thanks- I removed the England part largely because a co-signatory commented that this should be brought under the purview of the NHS across all regions, so it wouldn't necessarily be NHS England then?

Commented [12]: also "the NHS" as per above comment?

Commented [13]: and with greater resourcing of mutual aid groups

yet exist, ~~is not validated, and/~~ or is not yet widely used in the NHS, may undermine trust in ~~the government~~ and hamper ~~the~~ pandemic response.

Second, we need to support and protect health services so that they can cope with COVID-19, deliver routine care, and manage the ~~likely~~ significant morbidity from Long COVID. Reducing community transmission will be critical ~~for this~~ but following a decade of underfunding and a huge hit from the pandemic, health services need ~~urgent~~ financial support, adequate PPE and ~~urgent~~ measures to increase staff recruitment and retention.

Third, we need to ensure continued and undisrupted ~~education~~ ~~educatio at all levels~~ ~~n for children of all ages~~. For this, we need to control ~~community~~ transmission ~~both and transmission in community and~~ educational settings. Schools need clear guidance and support packages including better ventilation/air filtration, particularly through winter.^{9,10} We recommend use of face coverings for staff and secondary school children (with exemptions), and encourage mask use among primary school children. Empty facilities could be repurposed to allow face-to-face education with smaller class sizes to minimise transmission. Additional teachers could be recruited, or as SAGE has suggested, ~~a blended teaching system can be adopted (in a given week 50% students attend, 50% are taught online) like in several other countries implemented with success~~. For the latter, children must be provided with access to laptops/tablets and broadband internet. If school closures become necessary to control transmission, schools must be supported to move to online teaching to ensure all children can continue their education, ~~and~~ Families will need practical and financial support. Universities have been a major hub of community transmission and should move to online teaching where possible, with students supported to return home safely with support and guidance from ~~the~~ government.

Fourth, we need comprehensive economic support packages for the population over the coming month, especially for deprived communities. Ethnic minority groups will need targeted support as they are at higher risk due to ~~stigma~~, racism, ~~stigma~~, poor housing ~~stock~~, key worker roles and multigenerational households, ~~and have a higher mortality risk~~. Specific measures are required to protect children and women living in poverty and those at risk of domestic violence.

Fifth, we need a robust regulatory system and financial support to help employers and businesses make their facilities safe, and to ensure that facilities meet the necessary safety standards to remain open.¹¹ Occupational safety regulations need to be supported by anti-racism and equality laws robustly applied to employers. This will require the restoration of an adequate Health and Safety Inspectorate.

Sixth, we need coordination across the UK and ~~with Europe~~. The regional governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have ~~attempted to lead~~ ~~developed more science-driven and~~ ~~with more~~ effective responses, but have been hampered by poor national strategy. We need a joint strategy with Europe, including coordinated travel restrictions, data sharing, interoperability of COVID-19 tracing apps and use of EU passenger locator forms. The UK would benefit from joint development, procurement, and validation of rapid tests, medical kits and fair sharing protocols for vaccination.

Commented [14]: this is being done with success in other countries. In Canada for example, this is part of their strategy, I don't know if you want to make reference to this as a place it has been done successfully.

Here is a reference to Ontario's provincial policy

<https://www.ontario.ca/page/guide-reopening-ontario-schools#section-4>

Commented [15]: maybe "that has been successfully implemented in other countries". Or, a new sentence. "This has been successfully implemented in other countries".

Commented [16]: to do what? I think we may need to move this sentence earlier, or replace the full stop with a comma.

Commented [17]: may want to put a reference here too if we are allowed, not sure the limit?

Commented [18]: is this essentially duplicating what was said at the start of this sentence?

Commented [19]: Shouldn't this be "within Europe" or "with continental Europe"?

Commented [20]: I am not sure there is enough evidence to say they "have been" more effective, hence the suggested edit.

Finally, we need clear and consistent science-based public health messaging. The lack of this has allowed mis- and disinformation to thrive. The government needs to urgently restore public trust and confidence. It must reinstate daily briefings and be open, honest and transparent about where we are. It must admit to and learn from mistakes, not overstate its capabilities and achievements. The government must and treat the public as equal partners, working with communities to develop effective communication and health promotion strategies. The government must needs to clearly communicate that protecting school education, routine health care provision, and the economy are all inextricably tied to controlling COVID-19¹², and the government must stop conveying treating them as competing objectives.

Controlling the spread of COVID is possible. We only need to learn from the mistakes of the last 9 months, lest we find ourselves here yet again.

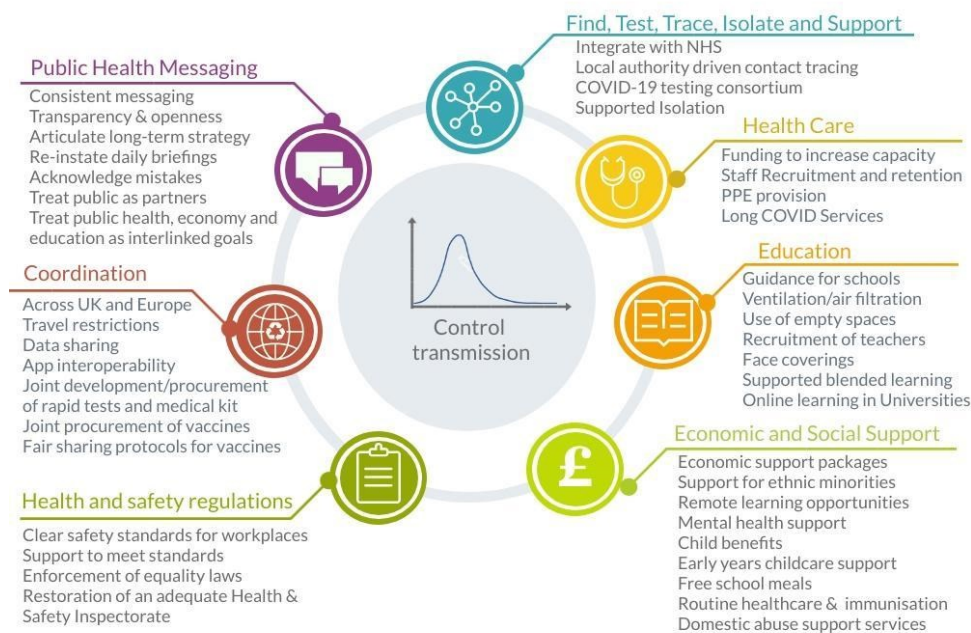


Figure 1: A Summary of recommendations for a sustainable COVID-19 strategy for the UK

Commented [21]: what is the difference between misinformation and disinformation? can this be one word to save words?

Commented [22]: It would be useful if this section acknowledged a way that communities become equal partners. This is one of many, but also was written about very early in the pandemic, but ignored.

Reference:
[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)31054-0/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)31054-0/fulltext)

Commented [23]: Given the "must" in the previous sentence, it might be better to go back to something like "needs to also".

Commented [24]: "conveying" doesn't seem to be quite the right term. Would "presenting" be better?

Commented [25]: Thought it would be nice to be explicit and positive here as we wrap up.

Commented [26]: I tend to think "only" makes this sound simpler than it probably is. Could simply remove it - "We need to learn from..."

Commented [27R26]: Agree.

Commented [28]: beautiful graph. I wonder whether we do (or not) need to mention support for risk groups in here?

Commented [29]: Just popping in to say that this figure is fantastic!

Commented [30R29]: Thanks!!

Commented [31R29]: agree, this is AMAZING. WAY better than a text box. Show me your ways!!

Commented [32]: Agree this is an amazing figure! suggestion for first one under FTTIS: "Integrate with and run by the NHS" or "Run by the NHS and integrated with NHS services"

Commented [33]: Yes, this is a fantastic figure.

Commented [34R33]: Agree. Great figure!

While this letter is about the UK situation, COVID-19 is a global pandemic and our collective responsibility. We are therefore writing as a concerned group of international scientists from the UK and other countries and regardless of our current country of residence, many of us have strong personal connections to the UK.

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